

# Ars poetica

–in Latin, the art of poetry. Using the criteria of genre and theme, it can be used to define at least three types of literary and metaliterary texts that form a clearly defined continuum from antiquity to the present day in the cultural universe of the West: 1) classical

normative and descriptive poetics, codifying the rules governing literary creation in various genres; 2) a specific type of self-reflexive modernist lyric poem devoted to expounding diverse views on the essence of art, often—but not necessarily—entitled “Ars poetica”; 3) self-instruction manuals and guidebooks for creative writing, intended for amateur authors, as well as essays devoted to the secrets of the writer’s craft. The *ars poetica* is connected with such terms as metaliterature, self-referentiality or self-reflexivity, and *mise en abyme*, used more generally to define certain literary techniques, but it refers to specific texts.

**Ad 1** The genre of the *ars poetica*, popular in ancient times, involved laying down the rules and norms that writers should observe and included pointers on authorial technique. These were usually theoretical treatises, and often took the form of a long didactic poem.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Horace’s *Ars Poetica* are commonly considered to be the first works of this type. The classical understanding of poetry as an art (gr. *techné*) was conducive to the development of instructional texts defining the rules of poetic creation. A potential author of literary works had to know the codified rules and master the related skills. In the Middle Ages the most important versions of the *ars poetica* emerged from the cultures of Paris and Orléans. The most well-known productions of that era include Mathieu de Vendôme’s *Ars versificatoria* (in the 12th century) and Jean de Garlande’s *Poetria* (in the 13th). The genre did not truly blossom until the Renaissance, which heralded a return *ad fontes*, to the classical perception of poetic art. In that period, treatises appeared that directly referenced the thought of Aristotle and Horace: Vida’s *De arte poetica* (1527), Scaliger’s *Poetices libri septem* (1561), Ronsard’s *Abrégé de l’Art Poétique* (1565) and many others. The development of French classicism in the seventeenth century brought further treatises of that kind, among which the most important and influential was Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’s *L’Art Poétique* (1674). The strong normative element in this poem took precedence over descriptive poetics, and had an enormous influence not only on French literature of the time, but also on the literary accomplishments of the entire European Enlightenment.

<sup>1</sup> See *Słownik terminów literackich* (Dictionary of Literary Terms), ed. J. Sławiński, Wrocław 1988.

In Poland, the history of the *ars poetica* begins with Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski's poem *De perfecta poesi* (*On Perfect Poetry*, approximately 1630), which enjoyed popularity throughout Europe. The production of such treatises reached its height during the Enlightenment, in connection with the revival of ancient literary theory doctrines. The most famous examples include *Sztuka rymotwórcza* (*The Art of Rhyming*) by Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski (1788), an adaptation of Boileau's *L'Art poétique* N. Boileau; Filip Neriusz Golański's *O wymowie i poezji* (*On Speech and Poetry*, 1786) and Waław Rzewuski's long poem *O nauce wierszopiskiej* (*On the Science of Writing Verse*, 1762). Attempts to codify the rules governing literature had previously been undertaken, using similar literary forms, in late classicism (by, among others, Ludwik Kropiński and Euzebiusz Słowacki).

Most seventeenth-century treatises on poetry were products of monastic schools, where they were a method sanctioned by tradition for transmitting knowledge about literature. The Jesuit teacher Juwencjusz's well-known book *Institutiones poeticae et rhetoricae* (1735) and Stanisław Konarski's *De arte bene cognitandi ad artem dicendi bene necessaria* (1767), aimed at helping adepts of rhetoric perfect their craft, were both prepared for didactic purposes.<sup>2</sup> The activities of the National Education Commission convoked in 1773 at the initiative of Stanisław August Poniatowski, prompted many eighteenth-century writers to prepare successive textbooks devoted to poetry and speech, more or less guided by the premises of education reform. Works not driven by didactic concerns remained decidedly a minority. Among the crucial texts presenting knowledge about literature, we must mention Łukasz Opaliński's *Poeta nowy* (*The New Poet*, 1661) and the above-mentioned poem by Waław Rzewuski, *O nauce wierszopiskiej* (1762). Most eighteenth-century *ars poetica* were integrally linked with instruction, although the most important among them—*O wymowie w prozie albo w wierszu* by Franciszek Karpiński (1782), Grzegorz Piramowicz's treatise *Wymowa i poezja dla szkół narodowych* (1792) and Filip Neriusz Golański's *O wymowie i poezji* (*Speech and Poetry for Schools of the Nation*, 1792)—distanced themselves from rigorous formulations of principles and rules of writing. In his treatise, *O rymotwórstwie i rymotwórcach* (*On Rhymers and Rhyming*, written 1798-1799), Ignacy Krasinski kept his presentation of the norms and rules of poetic production to a minimum in order to focus on a discussion of the achievements of European literature.<sup>3</sup>

During the same period, the most famous didactic poem of the Polish Enlightenment was written—*Sztuka rymotwórcza* (*The Art of Rhyming*) by Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski (1788), a work which enjoyed unfading popularity until the early 19th century. The poem was published twice in the 1780s by the Warsaw Piarists, a third time in Wilno (now Vilnius) in 1820, and a fourth version, corrected based on the author's notes, was edited by Franciszek Salezy Dmochowski for inclusion in the publication of his father's letters (Warszawa 1826). The most illuminating critical edition, based on the one developed by Stanisław Pietraszka for the Biblioteka Narodowa in 1956—is the text printed by T. Kostkiewiczowa and Z. Goliński in the book *Oświeceni o literaturze* (Warszawa 1993). Dmochowski's poem was intended to serve

<sup>2</sup> See T. Kostkiewiczowa, "Wstęp" (Introduction), in *Oświeceni o literaturze. Wypowiedzi pisarzy polskich 1740–1800* (Enlightenment Authors on Literature. Polish Writers' Opinions 1740-1800), vol. 1, ed. T. Kostkiewiczowa, Z. Goliński, Warszawa 1993, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

as a textbook for the pupils of Piarist colleges, but the range of its influence turned out to be much broader. The poem's synthesis of his perspectives as a literary theorist, codifier, and critic made it possible for him to present the totality of poetic experience of his era.<sup>4</sup> Dmochowski based his work on Boileau's *L'Art poétique*, but dealt with the newest tendencies in literature, to faithfully reflect the actually existing state of things.<sup>5</sup> He illustrated his views on the theory of literature with discussion of Polish works, thereby making a contribution to the development of Polish literary criticism. He called for the abandonment of zoilism and the development of a new model of evaluation, in which the wise critic would be an advisor to the author and his teacher at successive stages on his creative path. Dmochowski's didactic poem went considerably beyond the bounds of its design, becoming both a rhyming literary theory treatise and a testimony to the modern view of literary creation. The Piarist lecturer saw poetry as a treasure-house for storing the wisdom of generations and assigned it a vital role in shaping the principles of social concomitance. The guidelines set down by Quintilianus and his definition of rhetoric as *vir bonus dicendi peritus* (the good man speaking well), were extended in the age of the Enlightenment to include literature. Eighteenth-century iterations of *ars poetica* demanded from the poet not only fluency in his art, but also service to the common good and a focus on ethical values.

The most important task that the authors of *ars poetica* set for themselves was the formulation of theories of literary genres, setting down the rules governing each genre by particular conventions, and establishing the hierarchy among the genres. With regard to genres, references to antiquity had an instrumental function, though most of these Enlightenment treatises and poems expressed a longing for a Polish heroic epic poem, as that genre was unquestionably ranked highest. For Enlightenment sensibilities, the heroic epic poem constituted a demonstration of poetic craftsmanship and a proof of the artistic development of the Polish language, showing it to be equal to classical Latin and Greek in its possibilities. Unfortunately, eighteenth-century ideology, relying on empiricism and rationalism, to a large extent made it impossible to create the sense of the miraculous crucial to the functioning of the much-desired genre's conventions.

The prescriptions of Enlightenment classicism for creating a successful work that were contained in popular treatises on rhyming, while disappointing with regard to the heroic epic poem, were straightforward and easy to implement within the conventions of other genres. Anyone, contemporary opinion held, could write a clever occasional poem, a love elegy, a joking epigram or a faultless panegyric, as long as he possessed a minimum of talent and practiced his craft diligently. Versificatory skills were valued in the world of the gentry and at court, poems were given as gifts to neighbors (by, for example, Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński), presented at competitions (like the short poems about the king's dog written by, among others, Stanisław Trembecki), presented as messages attached to keepsakes (including, probably, Adam Naruszewicz's poem "Filiżanka" [The Teacup]), recorded in the annals of the nobility,

<sup>4</sup> See M. Klimowicz, *Oświecenie* (The Enlightenment), Warszawa 1988, p. 283; T. Kostkiewiczowa, Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski, in *Pisarze polskiego oświecenia* (Writers of the Polish Enlightenment), vol. 2, ed. T. Kostkiewiczowa, Z. Goliński, Warszawa 1994, p. 259.

<sup>5</sup> See Z. Libera, *Rozważania o wieku tolerancji, rozumu i gustu. Szkice o XVIII stuleciu*, Warszawa 1994, p. 231.

often giving a poetic form to reminiscences or reflections. Varied poems written with varying degrees of success by unknown authors testify to the universality of writing competencies, developed in the course of education at Jesuit or Piarist colleges. The abundance of easy tasks on which pupils daily had to concentrate their attention for a half hour or more allowed even the least gifted among them to form the habits of a journeyman author. In the age of the Enlightenment, the ability to write occasional verse was as universal and useful as drawing up an SMS message or holiday greetings in our day. The diverse levels of skill in these areas, from functional competency to a demonstration of undoubted creative talent, reflects their universal, ubiquitous use.

Innate abilities of varying magnitude (sometimes reaching the level of genius) need to be shaped through the analysis of good models and the study of the rules of writing. Imitation should serve toward the development of one's own creative choices and individual style. Blind observance of rules can lead—according to the theoreticians of the eighteenth century—to derivative, artificial work. The injunction of classical antiquity to practice *imitatio* receives a different interpretation in the Enlightenment than it did in the Renaissance, and the individual nature of creative work gradually takes on greater significance. Breaking existing rules in a justified manner in order to introduce some new artistic quality becomes desired and opens the door to the modern view that prioritizes originality and individualism. Subsequent eras failed to produce new renditions of the *ars poetica*. The old *ars poetica*s nonetheless remain a valuable document of how literary consciousness and aesthetic sensitivity were shaped in the past. The formal demands were revived to some extent in the modernist poetic manifestoes, but their largely avant-garde aesthetic and strong ideological tendencies discourage us from treating them as a continuation of the earlier *ars poetica* poems, which exuded the optimistic belief that though immortal masterpieces are few, the basics of writing poetry are available to pretty much anyone.

**Ad 2** In the nineteenth century the need to codify and instruct through literary works yielded to a heightened need for authorial reflection on personal creativity and the new role of poetic art in general. The Romantic view of poetry as an individual creative act, independent from formal rules, put an end to the popularity of didactic and theoretical treatises on the art of rhyming. For modern (post-Enlightenment) poetry, broadly defined, however, the new type of poem that became dominant can, by analogy with ekphrasis, a poem about an image, be considered an *ars poetica*, or poem about poetry. The category is thus defined in this case not as a formal criterion, but as a thematic one.

An *ars poetica* lyric poem can be said to be a modernist statement par excellence, emerging from the idea of the autonomy of aesthetic values and the thematic use of the search for new means of expression in order to convey the variously understood problem of “modernity,” relativized to a historically defined time and place. The popularity of the *ars poetica* genre resulted from numerous dominants in modernism: essentialism (the *ars poetica* as an attempt to answer the question of what constitutes literature's essence from the perspective

of its autonomy), poeticism (insistence on form and metatextuality), and constructionism (the sense of the poet's craft and the thematic use of the rules of verse in accordance with the view that meaning is found not in the content but in its new organization).<sup>6</sup> The structuralist and phenomenological view of literature that privileges a centripetally-oriented model of poetry, emphasizing the linguistic character of the utterance, its form and structure, is relevant here. The *ars poetica* problematizes those issues with particular intensity, subjecting them to extensive consideration, and at times illustrating by its own example the understanding of poetry it is proposing. The modernist sense of the crisis of language and difficulties with the expressibility of the modern subject's experiences, the break with mimesis and tendency toward the programmatic and toward providing theoretical justification of creative choices<sup>7</sup> fundamentally privilege self-conscious poems of the *ars poetica* type, which aspire to the status of a prototypical genre of modernism. A work which is "thinking about itself"<sup>8</sup> is here understood as a program or plan for a particular understanding of and approach to literature, a model of construction, built to demonstrate the possibilities offered by that view of poetic art. This pertains to both individual, "personal" authorial proposals and philosophically engaged ones belonging to such key currents in modernism as Symbolism, Futurism, the avant-garde, or classicism. If we place the autonomous, elitist school of modern literature at the center of the artistic and cultural constellation we call modernism,<sup>9</sup> then the *ars poetica* will constitute its model representative. It establishes the exclusionary approach commonly attributed to modernism, here based on the definition of the separate status of "poetry," a "poem," or "writing" on the basis of its differentiation from what is not proper to the form of literary art thus defined. It thereby assimilates the bipolar tendency typical of modernism: even if the author's proposal contradicts the very idea of the programmatic, refuses to offer a definition, or declares an anti-poetic stance, in so doing the author still takes a position against what poetry is not, polemicizing or playing with an "other" version of literariness. This modernist *ars poetica* thus would rightly abdicate its normative and didactic function in favor of innovation and individuality, a kind of anti-instructional quality setting it apart from both the old Polish version and later guides to creative writing.

A poem signals its function as an *ars poetica* by referring in its title to the semantic field to the lexeme "poetry," though this is not obligatory; one of the most well-known programmatic, metapoetic nineteenth-century poems is Charles Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondances" from his book *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), translated into Polish by Antoni Lange as "Oddźwięki" (Resonances). In the canon of French lyric poetry, crucial to the development of modernist poetry, the following *ars poetica*s also have a permanent place: Théophile Gautier's "L'Art" (1852), Artur Rimbaud's "Voyelles" (1872), Paul Verlaine's "Art poétique" (1874) and Guillaume Apollinaire's "La jolie russe" (1919). Works entitled "Ars poetica" number among the ac-

<sup>6</sup> See W. Bolecki, "Modernizm w literaturze polskiej XX w. (rekonesans)" (Modernism in Twentieth-Century Polish Literature [an exploration]), *Teksty Drugie* (Alternate Texts) 2002, 4, pp. 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Ziomek, "Epoki i formacje w dziejach literatury polskiej" (Periods and Formations in the History of Polish Literature), in Ziomek, *Prace ostatnie* (Last Works), Warszawa 1994, p. 53 onward.

<sup>8</sup> M. Głowiński, "Powieść jako metodologia powieści" (The Novel as Methodology of the Novel), in Głowiński, *Porządek, chaos, znaczenie. Szkice o powieści współczesnej* (Order, Chaos, Meaning. Sketches on the Contemporary Novel), Warszawa 1968, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> See R. Nycz, "Literatura nowoczesna: cztery dyskursy (tezy)" (Modern Literature: Four Discourses [Theses]), *Teksty Drugie* (Alternate Texts) 2002, 4, p. 38.

complishments of Jorge Luis Borges (Argentyna), Eliseo Diego (Cuba), Blaga Dimitrova (Bulgaria), Norman Dubie (US), Vicente Huidobro (Chile), Dana Levin (US), Archibald Macleish (US), and Rafael Felipe Oteriño (Argentina). The editor of a contemporary anthology presenting “poems about poetry” (Wiegiers 2003) included in it 108 poems from various national literatures (mainly in the West) and under a multitude of titles. Poland is represented in the anthology by Anna Swir (Anna Świrszczyńska)’s poems “Literatka robi pranie” (A Woman Writer Does Laundry, translated by Czesław Miłosz) and “Spotkanie autorskie” (Poetry reading, translated by L. Nathan).

Twentieth-century Polish poetry includes poems entitled “Ars poetica” by Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, Stanisław Grochowiak, Czesław Miłosz, and Leopold Staff. These works are among those poets’ most frequently quoted and interpreted poems, but the total number of works of poetry in Polish devoted to poetic art would be difficult to calculate; among the most well-known we can name Tuwim’s “Poezja” (Poetry), and his fragment “Kwiaty polskie” (Polish Flowers), beginning with the line “Poezjo! Jakie twoje imię?” (Poetry! What is your name?), W. Broniewski’s “Poezja” (Poetry) or Szymborska’s “Radość pisania” (The Joy of Writing). An experimental poem by Zenon Fajfer shows the vitality of this lyrical tradition; Fajfer is the inventor of so-called “liberatura” (liberature), “total literature, in which the text and the space of the book become an inseparable whole.”<sup>10</sup> One form of liberature is the “emanational poem” and its electronic version, the “kinetic poem.” Fajfer’s “liberary” ars poetica, entitled “ten letters” (translated from the original, entitled “dwadzieścia jeden liter” [twenty-one letters], by Katarzyna Bazarnik) can be found at the website [www.ha.art.pl](http://www.ha.art.pl).<sup>11</sup>

**Ad 3** Although the original formula *ars poetica* is now associated strictly with lyric poetry, in the works of the codifiers of antiquity it was by no means limited to that domain; on the contrary, the lyric lay at the margins of its purview. Aristotle devoted his treatise to the mimetic arts: tragedy and (in the part of his *Poetics* lost to posterity) comedy, as well as the heroic epic poem; dramatic art is also the focus of Horace’s attention in his *Ars poetica*.

As late as the eighteenth century, and even at the beginning of the nineteenth, the term “poetry” could be used to mean literature in general— that is the sense in which Gotthold Ephraim Lessing uses it in his 1766 study *Laocoon, An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. The term “ars poetica” can thus be used more broadly in the context of the theory of genres, extending to include treatises on fiction writing, or what Kundera, writing in French, called *L’art du roman*, the art of the novel (Kundera 1986), i.e., the art of storytelling. In this sense, the form would include essays by writers of both genders and various ranks, dealing with the secrets of their own or others’ writerly craft, a general or more detailed history of the genre,

<sup>10</sup><http://www.liberatura.pl> [accessed: 30.01.2015].

<sup>11</sup>Accessed: 30.01.2015.

and meditations on its current state, as well as the popular and plentiful “how to” books of self-instruction, the “ABCs of writing.” In the first category, we would have to place both masterwork essays on the novelist’s craft (such as Thomas Mann’s *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus*, 1946), and the autobiographical and career reflections of talented horror and thriller writer Stephen King (*On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, 2000).

In the Polish context, this type of *ars poetica* never achieved the level of popularity that it did in Anglophone culture. A classic of the genre is Jan Parandowski’s 1951 *Alchemia słowa* (Alchemy of the Word), reprinted many times since. In the preface to the fourth edition in 1965, the author wrote: “Some of my readers sought to find here the story of my own writing craft, masked by examples of other writers, and a desire to shape young literary men who have not yet learned the secrets of their trade. In truth, I had such an intention once, but I sought to fulfill it in a different way, namely, by creating an institute called the School of the Art of Writing. The project was met with astonishment, outrage, antipathy. I was accused of wanting to establish a ‘nursery of geniuses,’ and nobody thought of the fact that an introduction to the art of writing is something needed not only by future geniuses, but by many who, using words in their work, will never be writers.”<sup>12</sup>

The reaction that Parandowski describes was rooted in the view, still active in Polish literary culture, that writing is only an art, not a craft. The subjection of literary communication to the rules of the market which accompanied the systemic transformation of Poland in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, radically changed the situation. Today, in spite of statistics indicating a crisis of readership, an increasing number of people are engaged in producing texts that aspire to the status of literature, and thus the need for self-instruction manuals to guide them through the basics of the writing profession is also growing in Poland. One of the first home-grown books of this type was *Twórcze pisanie dla młodych panien* (Creative Writing for Young Ladies) by Izabela Filipiak (1999), whose title jokingly references the wave of excellent first books by female authors in Poland in the mid-1990s. Still, the publications of that sort available on the shelves of Polish bookstores largely remain translations from English, such as Nigel Watts’s *Writing a Novel* (translated by E. Kraskowska, 1998) or, in the same “Teach Yourself” series from Wydawnictwo Literackie, *Screenwriting* by Raymond G. Frensham (translated by P. Wawrzyszko, 1998) and *Writing Crime and Suspense Fiction* by Lesley Grant-Adamson (translated into Polish by M. Rusinek, 1999). It should be noted that these authors continue to rely on the undying Aristotelian rules for creating a plot. Unlike the modernist cult of high art, the contemporary dictates of the market and the postmodern erasure of the boundaries between literary currents have created perfect conditions for developing one’s writerly craft. The guidebooks that encourage such development may be seen as a throwback— if not necessarily a deliberate one—to the tradition of the old scholastic treatises on “the art of rhyming.”

Poland has also seen the rise of creative writing schools and courses, so popular in the United States, on its soil; one of the longest-operating of the institutions in the business is the Department of Literary-Artistic Studies at the Polish Studies Faculty of Jagiellonian University,

<sup>12</sup>J. Parandowski, *Alchemia słowa* (Alchemy of the Word), Warszawa 1998, pp. 10-11.

created in 1994 at the initiative of Professor Gabriela Matuszek. Another space in which literary advice has found splendid conditions for growth is, obviously, the Internet: look at the way it has expanded new genres of writing such as the blog or fan fiction. Today, with the help of an internet search engine, one can find guides on how to write all different kinds of texts: from the practical (CV, letter, application) to book reports and senior or doctoral theses, up to every type of popular genre novel: detective story, fantasy, historical fiction, novel of manners, romance, etc. Most of the publishers who specialize in belles lettres include on their official websites formal guidelines for the presentation of texts and advice for potential authors, including, among other pointers, "Write one word at a time. When you find the appropriate word, write it down."<sup>13</sup> The Internet, as a medium of instantaneous communication, has stimulated a particularly powerful and universal need to externalize individuals' writing possibilities; there is, therefore, no indication that contemporary iterations of the *ars poetica* will die out anytime soon.

<sup>13</sup><http://www.artefakty.pl/8-zasad-dobrego-pisania-autorstwa-neila-gaimana> [Accessed: 2.02.2015].

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## ABSTRACT:

The term „ars poetica” can refer both to a relatively new (sub)genre of poetry and to the classical Latin works (often) bearing the title ars poetica. The article proposes to use it to cover three areas of literary and metaliterary work: 1) classical normative-descriptive poetics; 2) self-reflexive poems devoted to the art of poetry; 3) guides to creative writing and essays on secrets of the writer's craft.

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